

Goodbye, Mother

by Hanif Kureishi

If you think the living are difficult to deal with, the dead can be worse.

This is what Harry's friend Gerald had said.

The remark returned repeatedly to Harry, particularly that morning when he had so wearily and reluctantly got out of bed. It was the anniversary of his father's death.

Whether it was seven or eight years, Harry didn't want to worry. He was to take mother to visit father's grave.

Harry wondered if his children, accompanied perhaps by his wife Alexandra, would visit his grave. What would they do with him in their minds; what would he become for them? He would never leave them alone, he had learned that. Unlike the living, the dead you couldn't get rid of.

Harry's mother was not dead but she haunted him in two guises: from the past, and in the present. He talked to her several times a day, in his mind.

This morning it was as a living creature that he had to deal with her.

He had been at home on his own for a week.

Alexandra, his wife, was in Thailand attending 'workshops'.

When they weren't running away, the two children, a boy and a girl, were at boarding school.

The previous night had been strange.

Mother was waiting for him in her overcoat at the door of the house he had been brought up in.

"You're late," she almost shouted, in a humorous voice.

He knew she would say this.

He tapped his watch. "I'm on time."

"Late, late!"

"No, look." He thrust his watch under her face.

"Yes you are late!"

For mother, he was always late. He was never there at the right time, and he never brought her what she wanted, and so he brought her nothing.

He didn't like to touch her but he made himself bend down to kiss her. What a small woman she was. For years she had been bigger than him, of course; bigger than everything else. She had remained big in his mind, pushing too many other things aside.

If she had a musty, slightly foul, bitter smell, it was not only that of an old woman, but a general notification, perhaps, of inner dereliction.

"Shall we set off?" he said.

"Wait."

She whispered something. She wanted to go to the toilet.

She trailed up the hall, exclaiming, grunting and wheezing. One of her legs was bandaged. The noises, he noticed, were not unlike those he made getting into bed.

In the living room the television was on, as it would be all the time. She would watch one soap opera while videoing others, catching up with them late at night or early in the morning.

It gave him pleasure to turn the TV off.

The small house seemed tidy but he remembered mother as a dirty woman. The cupboards, cups and cutlery were smeared and encrusted with old food.

Mother hadn't bathed them often. He had changed his underwear and other clothes only once a week. He thought it normal to feel soiled. He wondered if this was why other children had disliked and bullied him.

Mother had always watched television from the late afternoon until she went to bed. She hadn't wanted Harry or his brother or father to speak. If they opened their mouths, she told them to shut up. She didn't want them in the room at all. She preferred the faces on television to the faces of her family.

She was an addict.

Alexandra, had recently started - among what he considered other eccentricities - 'a life journal'.

When Harry left for work she sat in the kitchen overlooking the fields, blinking rapidly.

She would write furiously across the page in a crooked slope, picking out different coloured children's markers from a plastic wallet and throwing other markers down, flinging them right onto the floor where they could easily upend him.

"Why are you doing this writing?"

He walked around the table, kicking the lethal markers away.

It was like saying, why don't you do something more useful?

"I've decided I want to speak," she said. "To tell my story-"

"What story?"

"The story of my life - for what it is worth, if only to myself."

"Can I read it?"

"I don't think so." A pause. "No."

He said, "What do you mean, people want to speak?"

"They want to say what happiness is for them. And the other thing. They want to be known to themselves and to others."

"Yes, yes... I see."

"Harry, you would understand that," she said. "As a journalist."

"We keep to the facts," he said, heading for the door.

"Is that right?" she said. "The facts of life and death?"

"Yes."

Perhaps mother was ready to speak. That may have been why she had invited him on this journey.

If she'd let little in or out for most of her life, what she had to say might be powerful.

He was afraid.

This was the worst day he'd had for a long time.

He didn't go upstairs to the two small bedrooms, but waited for her at the door.

He knew every inch of the house, but he'd forgotten it existed as a real place rather than as a sunken ship in the depths of his memory.

It was the only house in the street which hadn't been knocked through or extended. Mother hadn't wanted noise or 'bother'. There was still an air-raid shelter at the end of the garden, which had been his 'camp' as a child. There was a disused outside toilet which hadn't been knocked down. The kitchen was tiny. He wondered how they'd all fitted in. They'd been too close to one another. Perhaps that was why he'd insisted that he and Alexandra buy a large house in the country, even though it was quite far from London.

He would, he supposed, inherit the house, sharing it with his brother. They would have to clear it out, selling certain things and burning others, before disposing of the property. They would have to touch their parent's possessions and their own memories again, for the last time.

Somewhere in a cupboard were photographs of him as a boy wearing short trousers and Wellington boots, his face contorted with anguish and fear.

Harry was glad to be going to father's grave. He saw it as reparation for the 'stupid' remark he'd made not long before father died, a remark he still thought about.

He led mother up the path to the car.

"Hasn't it been cold?" she said. "And raining non-stop. Luckily it cleared up for us. I looked out of the window this morning and thought God is giving us a good day out. It's been raining solid here- Haven't you noticed? Good for the garden! Doesn't make us grow any taller! We're the same size! Pity!"

"That's right."

"Hasn't it been raining out where you are?" She pointed at the ragged front lawn." My garden needs doing. Can't get anyone to do it. The old lady up the road had her money stolen. Boys came to the door, saying they were collecting for the blind. You don't have to worry about these things-

Harry said, "I worry about other things."

"There's always something. It never ends! Except where we're going!"

He helped mother into the car and leaned over her to fasten the seat belt.

"I feel all trapped in, dear," she said, "with this rope round me."

"You have to wear it."

He opened the window.

"Ooo...I'll get a draft," she said. "It'll cut me in two."

"It'll go right through you?"

"Right through me, yes, like a knife."

He closed the window and touched the dashboard.

"What's that wind?" she said.

"The heater."

"It's like a hair-dryer blowing over all me."

"I'll turn it off but you might get cold."

"I'm always cold. My old bones are froze. Don't get old!"

He started the engine.

With a startlingly quick motion, she threw her head back and braced herself. Her fingers dug into the sides of the seat. Her short legs and swollen feet were rigid.

When he was young, there were only certain times of the day when she would leave the house in a car, for fear they would be killed by drunken lunatics. He remembered the family sitting in their coats in the front room, looking between the clock and mother, waiting for the moment when she would say it was all right for them to set off, the moment when they were least likely to be punished for wanting to go out.

To him now, the engine sounded monstrous. He had begun to catch her fears.

“Don't go too fast,” she said.

“The legal speed,” he said.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she moaned as the car moved away.

Awake for most of the previous night, Harry had thought that she was, really, mad, or disturbed. This realisation brought him relief.

“She's off her head,” he repeated to himself, walking about the house.

He fell on his knees, put his hands together and uttered the thought aloud to all gods and humans interested and uninterested.

If she was 'ill' it wasn't his fault.

He didn't have to fit around her, or try to make sense of what she did.

If he only saw this now, it was because people were like photographs which took years to develop.

Harry's smart, grand friend Gerald had recently become Sir Gerald. Fifteen years ago they briefly worked together. For a long time they played cricket at the weekends.

Gerald had become a distinguished man, a television executive who sat on boards and made himself essential around town. He liked power and politics. You could say he traded in secrets, receiving them, hoarding them and passing them on like gold coins.

Harry considered himself too unimportant for Gerald, but Gerald had always rung every six months, saying it was time they met.

Gerald took him to his regular place where there were others like him. He was always seated in a booth in the corner where they could be seen but not overheard.

Gerald liked to say whatever was on his mind, however disconnected. Harry didn't imagine that Gerald would do this with anyone else.

Last time Gerald said: “Harry, I'm older than you and I've been alive for sixty years. If you requested any wisdom I'd have fuck-all to pass on, except to say: you can't blame other people for your misfortunes. More champagne? Now, old chap, what's on your mind?”

Harry told Gerald that Alexandra had taken up with a female hypnotist; a hypnotherapist.

“She's done what?” said Gerald.

“It's true.”

Gerald was chuckling.

Harry noticed that mother was trembling.

On the way to see her, Harry had worried about her liking the new Mercedes, which he called “God's chariot.”

The car and what it meant had no interest for her. Her eyes were closed.
He was trying to control himself.

A year ago a friend had given he and Alexandra tickets for a 'hypnotic' show in the West End.

They had gone along sceptically. She preferred serious drama and he none at all. He couldn't count the Ibsens he had slept through. However he did often recall one Ibsen which had kept his attention; the one in which the protagonist tells the truth to those closest to him, and destroys their lives.

The hypnotist was young, his patter amusing, reassuring and confident. Members of the audience rushed to the stage to have his hands on them. Under the compere's spell they danced like Elvis, using broom handles as microphone stands. Others put on big ridiculous glasses through which they 'saw' people naked.

After, he and Alexandra went to an Italian restaurant in Covent Garden for supper. She liked being taken out.

"What did you think of the show?" she asked.

"It was more entertaining than a play. Luckily, I wasn't taken in."

"Taken in?" she said. "You thought it was fake? Everyone was paid to pretend?"

"Of course."

"Oh I didn't think that at all."

She couldn't stop talking about it, about the 'depths' of the mind, about what was 'underneath' and could be 'unleashed'.

The next day she went into town and bought books on hypnotism.

She hypnotised him to sleep in the evenings. It wasn't difficult. He liked her voice.

Harry was thirteen when father crashed the car. They were going to the seaside to stay in a caravan. All summer he had been looking forward to the holiday. But not only had Mother been screeching from the moment the car left their house, but - a non-driver herself - she had clutched at father's arm continually, and even dragged at the driving wheel itself.

She was successful at last.

They ran into the front of an on-coming van, spent two nights in hospital and had to go home without seeing the sea. Harry's face looked as though it had been dug up with a trowel.

He looked across at mother's formidable bosom, covered by a white polo-neck sweater. Down it, between her breasts, dangled a jewel-covered object, like half a salt pot.

At last she opened her eyes and loudly began to read out the words on advertising hoardings; she read the traffic signs and the instructions written on the road; she read the names on shops.

She was also making terrible noises from inside her body, groaning, he thought, like Glen Gould playing Bach.

Visiting father's grave had been her idea. "It's time we went back again," she had said. "So he knows he hasn't been forgotten. He'll hear his name being called."

But it was as if she were being dragged to her death.

If he said nothing she might calm down. The child he once was would be alarmed by her terrors, but why shouldn't she make her noises? Except that her babbling drove out everything else. She ensured there was no room for in the car for any other words.

He realised what was happening. If she couldn't actually take the television with her in the car, she would become the television herself.

Alexandra was interested in the history of food, the garden, the children, novels. She sang in the local choir. Recently she had started to take photographs and learn the cello.

She was a governor of the local school and helped the children with their reading and writing. She talked of how, inexplicably, they suffered from low self-esteem. It was partly caused by 'class' but she suspected there were other, 'inner' reasons.

Her curiosity about hypnotism didn't diminish.

A friend introduced Alexandra to a local woman, a hypnotherapist. 'Amazing Olga', Harry called her.

"What does she do?" he asked, imagining Alexandra walking about with her eyes closed, her arms extended in front of her.

"She hypnotises me. Suddenly I'm five years old and my father is holding me. Harry, we talk of the strangest things. She listens to my dreams."

"What is this for?"

For Harry, telling someone your dreams was like going to bed with them.

"To know myself," she said.

'Amazing' Olga must have told Alexandra that Harry would believe they were conspiring against him.

She touched his arm and said, "Your worst thoughts and criticisms about yourself - that's what you think we're saying about you in that room."

"Something like that," he said.

"It's not true," she said.

"Thank you. You don't talk about me at all?"

"I didn't say that."

"Nobody likes to be talked about," he said.

"As if it weren't inevitable."

In the train to work, and in the evenings when he fed the animals, he thought about this. He would discuss it with Gerald next time.

Faith healers, astrologers, tea-leaf examiners, palm readers, aura photographers: there were all manner of weirdo eccentrics with their hands in the pockets of weak people who wanted to know what was going on, who wanted certainty. Uncertainty was the one thing you couldn't sell as a creed and it was, probably, the only worthwhile thing.

What would he say about this?

He did believe there was such a thing as a rational world view. It was based on logic and science. These days 'enlightenment values' were much discredited. It didn't follow they were worthless. It was all they had.

"If you or one of the children fell sick, Alexandra-" he put to her one night.

It was dark but he had switched the garden lights on. They were sitting out, eating their favourite ice-cream and drinking champagne. His trees shaded the house; the two young labradors, one black, one white, sat at their feet. He could see his wood in the distance, carpeted with bluebells in the spring, and the treehouse he would restore for his

grandchildren. The pond, stifled by duckweed, had to be cleaned. He was saving up for a tennis court.

This was what he had lived for and made with his labour. He wasn't old and he wasn't young, but at the age when he was curious about, and could see, the shape of his whole life, his beginning and his end.

"You'd go to a doctor, wouldn't you? Not to a faith healer."

"That's right," she said. "First to a doctor."

"Then?"

"And then, perhaps to a therapist."

"A therapist? For what?"

"To grasp the logic-

"What logic?"

"The inner logic...of the illness."

"Why?"

"Because I am one person," she said. "A whole."

"And you are in control?"

"Something in me is making my life - my relationships I mean - the way they are, yes."

Something in him opposed this but he didn't know what to say.

She went on, "There are archaic unknown sources which I want to locate."

She quoted her therapist, knowing that at university he had studied the history of ideas, "If Whitehead said that all philosophy is footnotes to Plato, Freud taught us that maturity is merely a footnote to childhood."

He said, "If it's all been decided years ago, if there's no free will but only the determinism of childhood, then it's pointless to think we can make any difference."

"Freedom is possible."

"How?"

"The freedom that comes from understanding."

He was thinking about this.

His car had left the narrow suburban streets for bigger roads. Suddenly he was in a maze of new one-way systems bounded by glittering office blocks. He drove through the same deep highway several times, with the same accompaniments from mother.

Setting off from home that morning, he had been convinced that he knew how to get to the cemetery, but now, although he recognised some things, it was only a glancing, bewildered familiarity. He hadn't driven around this area for more than twenty five-years.

Mother seemed to take it for granted that he knew where he was. This might have been the only confidence she had in him. She loved 'safe' drivers. She liked coaches; for some reason, coach drivers, like some doctors, were trustworthy. Being safe mattered more than anything else because, in an inhospitable world, they were always in danger.

He didn't want to stop to ask the way, and he couldn't ask mother for fear his uncertainty would turn her more feverish.

Cars driven by tattooed south London semi-criminals with shaven heads, seemed to be pursuing them; vans flew them from unexpected angles. His feet were cold but his hands were sweating.

If he didn't keep himself together, he would turn into her.

He hadn't spoken to mother for almost three months. He had had an argument with his brother - there had almost been a fist fight in the little house - and mother, instead of making the authoritative intervention he wished for, had collapsed weeping.

"I want to die," she wailed. "I'm ready!"

The forced pain she gave off had made him throw up in the gutter outside the house.

He had looked up from his sick to see the faces of the neighbours at their windows - the same neighbours, now thirty years older, he'd known as a child.

They would have heard from mother that he was well paid.

Sometimes he was proud of his success. He had earned the things that other people wanted.

He worked in television news. He helped decide what the News was. Millions watched it. Many people believed that the News was the most important thing that had happened in the world that day. To be connected, they needed the News in the way they needed bread and water.

He remembered how smug he had been, self-righteousness even, as a young man at university. Some went to radical politics or Mexico; others sought a creative life. The women became intense, quirkily intelligent and self-obsessed. Being lower middle-class, he worked hard, preparing his way. The alternative, for him, he knew, was relative poverty and boredom. He had learned how to do his job well; for years he had earned a good salary.

He had shut his mouth and pleased the bosses. He had become a boss himself; people were afraid of him and tried to guess what he was thinking.

He worried there was nothing to him, that under his thinning hair he was a 'hollow man', a phrase from the poetry he'd studied at school. Being 'found out' Gerald called it, laughing, like someone who had perpetrated a con.

Harry's daughter Heather talked of wanting confidence. He understood that. But where could confidence originate, except from a parent who believed in you?

There she was next to him, vertiginous, drivelling, and scratching in fear at the seat she sat on, waving, in her other hand the disconnected seatbelt buckle.

It wasn't long before Alexandra started to call it 'work'.

The 'work' she was doing on herself.

The 'work' with the different coloured pens.

The 'work' of throwing them on the floor, of being the sort of person who threw things about if she felt like it.

"Work," he said, with a slight sneer. "The 'work' of imagining an apple and talking to it."

"The most important work I've done."

"It won't pay for the barn to be cleared and rebuilt."

"Why does that bother you so much?"

Money was a way of measuring good things. The worth of a man had to be related to what he was able to earn. She would never be convinced by this.

Her 'work' was equivalent to his work. No; it was more important. She had started to say his work was out of date, like prisons, schools, banks and politics.

She said, "The cost and waste of transporting thousands of people from one part of

the country to another for a few hours. These things continue because they have always happened, like bad habits. These are nineteenth century institutions and we are a few months from the end of the twentieth century. People haven't yet found more creative ways of doing things."

He thought of the trains on the bridges over the Thames, transporting trainloads of slaves to futility.

In the suburbs where mother still lived, the idea was to think of nothing; to puzzle over your own experience was to gratuitously unsettle yourself. How you felt wasn't important, only what you did, and what others saw.

Yet he knew that if he wasn't looking at himself directly, he was looking at himself in the world. The world had his face in it! If you weren't present to yourself, you'd find yourself elsewhere!

Almost all the men in the street where he had lived had lighted sheds at the end of the garden - or on their allotments - to which they retreated in the evenings. These men were too careful for the pub.

The sheds were where the men went to get away from the women. The women who weren't employed and had the time, therefore, to be disturbed. It was a division of labour: they carried the madness for the men.

"All right mother?" he said at last. "We aren't doing so badly now."

They had escaped the highway and regained the narrow, clogged suburban roads.

"Not too bad, dear," she sighed, passing the back of her hand across her forehead.

"Oh watch out! Can't you look where you're going! There's traffic everywhere!"

"That means we go slower."

"They're so near!"

"Mother, everyone has an interest in not getting killed."

"That's what you think!"

If mother had kept on repeating the same thing and squealing at high volume, he would have lost his temper; he would have turned the car round, taken her home and dumped her. That would have suited him. Alexandra was coming back tomorrow; he had plenty to do.

But after a few minutes mother calmed down and even gave him directions.

They were on their way to the cemetery.

It was easy to be snobbish and uncharitable about the suburbs, but what he saw around him was ugly, dull and depressing. He had, at least, got away.

But like mother continuing to live here when there was no reason for it, he had put up with things unnecessarily. He had never rebelled, least of all against himself.

He had striven - up to a point - before the universe, like his mother, had shut like a door in his face.

He had been afraid Alexandra would fall in love with Thailand, or some exotic idea, and never want to return. Mother's irritability and indifference had taught him that women wanted to escape. If they couldn't get away, they hated you for making them stay.

There was a couple he and Alexandra had known for a long time. The woman had laboured for years to make their house perfect. One afternoon as he often did, Harry drove over for tea in their garden. The woman cultivated wild flowers; there was a summerhouse.

Harry sighed and said to the man, "You have everything you could want here. If I were you, I'd never go out."

"I don't," the man replied. He added casually, "If I had my way, of course, we wouldn't live here but in France. They have a much higher standard of living."

The man did not notice but at this the woman crumpled, as if she'd been shot. She went inside, shut the windows and became ill.

She could not satisfy her husband, couldn't quell his yearnings. It was impossible, and, without him asking her to do it, she had worn herself out trying.

If Alexandra was seeking cures, it was because she didn't have everything and he had failed her.

Yet their conflicts, of which there were at least one a week - some continued for days - weren't entirely terrible. Their disagreements uncovered misunderstandings. Sometimes they wanted different things but only in the context of one another. She was close to his wishes, to the inner stream of him. They always returned to one another. There was never a permanent withdrawal, as there had been with mother.

There were times when it was a little paradise.

In the newspapers he learned of actors and sportsmen having affairs. Women wanted these people. It seemed easy.

There were attractive women in the office but they were claimed immediately. They weren't attracted to him. It wasn't only that he looked older than his years, as his wife had informed him. He looked unhealthy.

Plastic, anonymous, idealised sex was everywhere; the participants were only young and beautiful, as if desire was the exclusive domain of the thin.

He didn't think it was sex he wanted. He liked to believe he could get by without excessive pleasure, just as he could get by without drugs. He kept thinking that the uses of sex in the modern world was a distraction. It didn't seem to be the important thing.

What was important? He knew what it was - impermanence, decay, death and the way it informed the present - but couldn't bring himself to look straight at it.

"Where is Alexandra today?" mother asked. "I thought she might come with us. She never wants to see me."

Mother's 'madness' had no magnetism for Alexandra; her complaints bored her; Alexandra had never needed her.

He said, "She's gone to Thailand. But she sends beautiful letters to me - by fax - every day."

He explained that Alexandra had gone to a centre in Thailand for a fortnight to take various courses. There were dream, healing, and 'imaging' workshops.

Mother said, "What is she doing there?"

"She said on the phone that she is with other middle-aged women in sandals and bright dresses with a penchant for Joni Mitchell. The last I heard she was hugging these

women and taking part in rituals on the beach.”

“Rituals?”

He had said to Alexandra when she rang, “But you can't dance, Alexandra. You hate it.”

“I can dance badly,” she replied. “And that's what I do, night after night.”

Dancing badly.

Harry said to mother, “She told me she looked up and the moon was smiling.”

“At her in particular?” said mother.

“She didn't itemise,” said Harry.

“This is at your expense?”

Alexandra, somewhat patronizingly, had felt she had to explain it wasn't an infidelity.

“There's no other man involved,” she said before she left, packing a few things into their son's rucksack. “I hope there's not even any men there.”

He looked at her clothes.

“Is that all you're taking?”

“I will rely on the kindness on strangers,” she replied.

“You'll be wearing their clothes?”

“I don't see why not.”

It was an infidelity if she was “coming alive”, as she put it. What could be a more disturbing betrayal than 'more life' even as he felt himself to be fading!

He was a conventional man, and he lived a conventional life in order for her, and the children presumably, one day, to live unconventional ones.

Was he, to her, a dead weight? He feared losing sight of her, as she accelerated, dancing, into the distance.

“Anyway,” mother said, “Thank you Harry, dear-”

“For what?”

“For taking me to dad's- Dad's-”

He knew she couldn't say grave.

“That's okay.”

“The other sons are good to their mothers.”

“Better than me?”

“Some of them visit their mums every week. They sit with them for hours, playing board games. One boy sent her on a cruise.”

“On the Titanic?”

“Little beast you are! Still, without you I'd have to take three buses to see dad.”

“Shame you didn't learn to drive.”

“I wish I had.”

He was surprised. “Do you really?”

“Then I would have got around.”

“Why didn't you?”

“Oh I don't know now. Too much to do, with the washing and the cleaning.”

He asked, “Is there anything else that you would like me to do for you?”

“Thank you for asking,” she said. “Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Harry, I want to go on a journey.”

One morning when Alexandra was scribbling he said, “I’ll say goodbye.”

She came to the door to wave, as she always did if she wasn’t driving him to the station.

She said she was sorry he had to go into the office - ‘such a place’ - everyday.

“What the hell is wrong with it?” he asked.

The building was a scribble of pipes and wires, inhabited by dark suits with human beings inside. The harsh glow of the computer and TV screens reflected nothing back - nothing reflected into eternity.

Something changed after she said this.

He travelled on the train with the other commuters. The idea they shared was a reasonable though stifling one: to live without - or to banish - inner and outer disorder.

He was attempting to read a book about Harold Wilson, Prime Minister when Harry was young. There was a lot about the ‘balance of payments’. Harry kept wondering what he had been wearing on his way to school the day that Wilson made a particular speech. He wished he had his school exercise books, and the novels he had read then. This was a very particular way of doing history.

He had to put his face by the train window but tried not to breath out for fear his soul would fly from his body and he would lose everything that had meaning for him.

At work he would feel better.

He believed in work. It was important to sustain ceaseless effort. Making; building - this integrated the world. It was called civilisation. Otherwise the mind, like an errant child, ran away. It wanted only pleasure and nothing would get done.

The ‘News’ was essential information. Without it you were uninformed, uneducated even. You couldn’t see the way the world was moving. The News reminded you of other people’s lives, of human possibility and destructiveness. It was part of his work to glance at the French, German, American and Italian papers every day.

However, an image haunted him. He was taking his university finals and a kid in his class - a hippy or punk, a strange straggly peacock - turned over the exam paper, glanced at the question and said, “Oh I don’t think there’s anything here for me today,” and left the room, singing ‘School’s Out.’

Beautiful defiance.

Couldn’t Harry walk into the office and say, “There’s nothing here for me today!” Or, “Nothing of interest has happened in the world today!”

He remembered his last years at school, and then at university. The other mothers helped their student kids into their new rooms, unpacking their bags and making the beds. Mother had disappeared into herself, neither speaking nor asking questions. As the size of her body increased, her self shrank, the one defending the other. He doubted she even knew what courses he was taking, whether he had graduated or not or even what ‘graduation’ was.

She didn’t speak, she didn’t write to him, she hardly phoned. She was staring into the bright light, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, year after year. Television was her drug and anesthetic, her sex her conversation her friends her family her heaven her...

Television did her dreaming for her.

It couldn't hear her.

After the television had 'closed down', and father was listening to music in bed, she walked about the house in her dressing gown and slippers. He had no idea what she could be thinking, unless it was the same thing repeatedly.

It was difficult to be attached to someone who could only be attached to something else. A sleeping princess who wouldn't wake up.

He wondered if he'd gone into television so that he would be in front of her face, at least some of the time.

At this, he laughed.

"Don't shake like that," she said. "Look where you're going."

"What journey?" he said.

"Oh yes," she said. "I haven't told you."

On the way to work he had started to feel that if he talked with anyone they would get inside him; parts of the conversation would haunt him; words, thoughts, bits of their clothing would return like undigested food and he would be inhabited by worms, knats, mosquitos.

Going to a meeting or to lunch, if human beings approached, his skin prickled and itched.

If he thought, "Well, it's only a minor irritation", his mind became unendurable, as if a landscape of little flames had been ignited not only on the surface of his skin, but within his head.

The smell, the internal workings of every human being, the shit, blood, mucus swilling in a bag of flesh, made him mad. He felt he was wearing the glasses the stage hypnotist had given people, but instead of seeing them naked, he saw their inner physiology, their turbulence, their death.

At meetings he would walk up and down, constantly going out of the room and then out of the building, to breathe. From behind pillars in the foyer, strangers started to whisper the 'stupid' remark at him, the one he had made to father.

His boss said, Harry you're coming apart. Go and see the doctor.

The doctor informed him there were drugs to remove this kind of radical human pain in no time.

Harry showed the prescription to Alexandra. She was against the drugs. She wouldn't even drink milk because of the 'chemicals' in it.

He told her, "I'm in pain."

She replied, "That pain...it's your pain. It's you - your unfolding life."

They went to a garden party. The blessed hypnotherapist would be there. It would be like meeting someone's best friend for the first time. He would see who Alexandra wanted to be, who she thought she was like.

He spotted 'Amazing' Olga on the lawn. She wore glasses. If she had a slightly hippy aspect it was because her hair hung down her back like a girl's, and was streaked with grey.

Alexandra had copied this, he realised. Her hair was long now, making her look slightly wild; different, certainly, to the well-kempt wives of Harry's colleagues.

The hypnotherapist looked formidable and self-possessed. Harry wanted to confront her, to ask where she was leading his wife, but he feared she would either say something humiliating or look into his eyes and see what he was like. It would be like being regarded by a policeman. All one's crimes of shame and desire would be known.

He didn't like Alexandra going away because he knew he didn't exist in the mind of a woman as a permanent object. The moment he left the room they forgot him. They would think of other things, and of other men, better at everything than he.

He was rendered a blank. This wasn't what the women's magazines - which his daughter Heather read - called low self-esteem. It was being rubbed out, annihilated, turned into nothing by a woman he was too much for.

Sometimes he and Alexandra had to attend dull dinners with work colleagues.

"I always have to sit next to the wives," he complained, resting on the bed to put his heavy black shoes on. "They never say anything I haven't heard before."

Alexandra said, "If you bother to talk and listen, it's the wives who are interesting. There's always more to them than there is to the husbands."

He said, "That attitude makes me angry. It sounds smart but it's prejudice."

"There's more to the women's lives."

"More what?"

"More emotion, variety, feeling. They're closer to the heart of things - to children, to themselves, to their husbands and to the way the world really works."

"Money and politics are the engine."

"They're a cover story," she said. "It's on top, surface."

He was boring. He bored himself.

She was making him think of why she would want to be with him; of what he had to offer.

When he came home from school with news spilling from him, mother never wanted to know. "Quiet, quiet," she said. "I'm watching something."

Gerald had said, "Even when we're fifty we expect our mummy and daddy to be perfect but they are only ever going to be just what they are."

It would be childish to blame mother for what he was now. But if he didn't understand what had happened, he wouldn't be free of his resentment and couldn't move on.

Understand it! He couldn't even see it! He lived within it, but like primitive man almost entirely ignorant of his environment - and trying to influence it by magic - in the darkness he couldn't make anything out!

Gerald had said, "Children expect too much!"

Too much! Affection, attention, love - to be liked! How could it be too much?

On their wedding day he had not anticipated that his marriage to Alexandra would become more complicated and interesting as time passed. It hadn't become tedious or exhausted; it hadn't even settled into a routine. He lived the life his university friends would have despised for its unadventurousness. Yet, everyday it was strange, unusual, terrifying.

He had wanted a woman to be devoted to him, and, when, for years, she had been,

he had refused to notice.

Now she wasn't; things had got more lively, or 'kicked up', as his son liked to say.

Alexandra blazed in his face, day after day.

Mother though, hadn't changed. She was too preoccupied to be imaginative. He wasn't, therefore, used to alteration in a woman.

Last night-

He had found himself searching through Alexandra's clothes, letters, books, make-up. He didn't read anything, and barely touched her belongings.

He had read in a newspaper about a public figure who had travelled on trains with a camera concealed in the bottom of his suitcase in order to look up women's skirts, at their legs and underwear. The man said, I wanted to feel close to the women.

When it comes to love, we are all stalkers.

Last night Harry checked the house, the garden and the land. He fed the dogs, Heather's horse, the pig and the chickens.

Alexandra kept a tape deck in one of the collapsing barns. He had seen her, dancing on her toes, her skirt flying, singing to herself. He'd recalled a line from a song, "I saw you dancing in the gym, you both kicked off your shoes..."

On an old table she kept pages of writing; spread out beside them were photographs she had been taking to illustrate the stories.

She said, "If there's a telephone in the story, I'll take a picture of a phone and place it next to the paragraph!"

In the collapsing barn he put on a tape and danced, if dancing was the word for his odd arthritic jig, in his pyjamas and Wellington boots.

That was why he felt stiff this morning.

"There is a real world," Richard Dawkins the scientist had said.

Harry had repeated this to himself and then passed it on to Alexandra as an antidote to her vapourous dreaming.

She had laughed and said, "Maybe there is a real world. But there is no one living in it."

It was inevitable: they were nearing the churchyard and a feeling of dread came over him.

Mother turned to him, "I've never seen you so agitated."

"Me? I'm agitated?"

"Yes. You're twitching like a St Vitus dance person. Who d'you think I'm talking about?"

Harry said, "No, no - I've got a lot to think about."

"Is something bothering you?"

Alexandra had begged him not to take medication. She promised to support him. She'd gone away. The 'strange' had never come this close to him before.

But it was too late for confidences with mother.

He had made up his mind about her years ago.

Mother hated cooking, housework and gardening. She hated having children. They asked too much of her. She didn't realise how little children required.

He thought of her shopping on Saturday, dragging the heavy shopping home, and cooking the roast on Sunday. The awfulness of the food didn't bother him; the joylessness which accompanied the futile ritual did. It wasn't a lunch that started out hopefully, but one which failed from the start. The pity she made him feel for her, was, at that age, too much for him.

She couldn't let herself enjoy anything and she couldn't flee.

If he had made a decent family himself it was because Alexandra had always believed in it: any happiness he experienced was with her and the children. She had run their lives, the house and the garden, with forethought, energy and precision. Life and meaning had been created because she had never doubted the value of what they were doing. It was love.

If there was anguish about 'the family' it was because people knew it was where the good things were. He understood that happiness didn't happen by itself; making a family work was as hard as running a successful business, or being an artist.

To him it was doubly worthwhile because he had had to discover this for himself. Sensibly - somehow - he had wanted what Alexandra wanted.

She had kept them together and pushed them forward.

He loved her for it.

Now it wasn't enough for her.

He said, "Would it be a good idea to get some flowers?"

"Lovely," said mother. "Let's do that."

They stopped at a garage and chose some.

"He would have loved these colours," she said.

"He was a good man," murmured Harry.

"Oh yes, yes! D'you miss him?"

"I wish I could talk to him."

She said, "I talk to him all the time."

Harry parked the car. They walked through the gates.

The cemetery was busy, a thoroughfare, more of a park than a burial ground.

Women pushed prams, school kids smoked on benches, dogs peed on gravestones.

Father had a prime spot to rot in, at the back, by the fence.

Mother put her flowers down.

Harry said, "Would you like to get down, mother? You can use my jacket."

"Thank you dear, but I'd never get up again."

She bent her head and prayed and wept, her tears falling on the grave.

Harry walked about, weeping and muttering his own prayer, "at least let me be alive when I die!"

Father would have been pleased by their attendance.

He thought: dying isn't something you can leave to the last moment.

He was like the old man, too. He had to remember that.

Being pulled in two directions had saved him.

He walked away from mother and had a cigarette. His boss had told him

unequivocally 'to rest'. He said, "To be frank, you're creating a bad atmosphere in the office."

Harry's fourteen year old daughter Heather had run away from boarding school. Returning from the shops two days after Alexandra had left for Thailand, he found her sitting in the kitchen.

"Hallo there, dad," she said.

"Heather. This is a surprise."

"Is it okay?"

She looked apprehensive.

He said, "It's fine."

They spent the day together. He didn't ask why she was there.

He got on well with the boy who seemed, at the moment, to worship him. He would, Gerald said, understand him for another couple of years, when the boy was fourteen, and then never again.

Over Heather he felt sorry and guilty about a lot of things. If he thought about it, he could see that her sulks, fears and unhappinesses - called adolescence - were an extended mourning for a lost childhood.

After lunch, when she continued to sit there, looking at him, he did say, "Is there anything you want to ask me?"

"Yes," she said. "What is a man?"

"Sorry?"

"What is a man?"

"Is that it?"

She nodded.

What is a man?

She hadn't said, "What is sex?" Not, 'Who am I?' Not even, "What am I doing here in this kitchen and on earth?" But, "What is a man?"

She cooked for him. They sat down together in the living room and listened to a symphony. He put her in her own bed; he read to her from Alice In Wonderland.

He wanted to know her.

It had taken him a while to see - the screechings of the feminists had made him resistant - that the fathers had been separated from their children by work, though provided with the consolations of power. The women, too, had been separated from important things. It was a division he had had in the back of his mind - had taken for granted - most of his life.

They were lower middle-class; his father had had a furniture shop. He had worked all day his entire life and had done well. By the end he had two furniture shops; they did carpeting, too.

Harry and his brother had helped in the shops.

It was the university holidays when Harry accompanied his father on the train to Harley Street. Father had retired. He was seeking help for depression.

"I'm feeling too down all the time," he said. "I'm not right."

As they sat in the waiting room, father said of the doctor, "He's the top man."

"How d'you know?"

"There's his certificate. I can't make out the curly writing from here, but I hope it's signed."

"It is signed."

"You've got good eyes then." Father said, "This guy will turn me into Fred Astaire." Father was smiling, full of hope for the first time in weeks.

"What's wrong, Sir?" said the doctor, a man qualified to make others better.

The doctor listened to father's terse, urgent account of inner darkness and spiritual collapse before murmuring, "Life has no meaning, eh?"

"The wrong meaning," said father, carefully.

"The wrong meaning," repeated the doctor.

"You've got it," said father.

The doctor scribbled a prescription for tranquilisers. They'd hardly been in there for half an hour.

As they went away, Harry didn't want to point out that the last thing tranquilizers did was make you happy.

Harry was puzzled and amused by father striking out for happiness. It seemed a little late. What did he expect? Why couldn't he sink into benign, accepting old age? Isn't that what he, Harry, would have done?

He was taking mother's side. This was the deep, wise view. Happiness was impossible, undesirable even, an unnecessary distraction from the hard, long serious business of unhappiness. Mother would not be separated from the sorrow which covered her like a shroud.

In life Harry chose the dullest things - deliberately at first, as if wanting to see what it felt like to be mother. Then it became a habit. Why did he choose this way rather than his father's?

His daughter Heather had always been fussy about her food.

By the time she was thirteen at every meal she sat at the table with her head bent, her fork held limply between her fingers, watched by her mother, brother and father. Could she eat or not?

Harry was unable to bear her 'domination of the table' as she picked at her food, shoved it around the plate and made ugly faces before announcing that she couldn't eat today. It disgusted him. If he pressurised her to eat, Heather would weep.

He saw that it isn't the most terrible people that we hate, but those who confuse us the most. His power was gone; his compassion broke down. He mocked and humiliated her. He could have murdered this little girl who would not put bread in her mouth.

He had, to his shame, refused to let Heather eat with them. He ordered her to eat earlier than the family, or later, but not with him, her mother or brother.

Alexandra had said that if Heather wasn't allowed to eat with them, she wouldn't sit at the table either.

Harry started taking his meals alone in another room, with a newspaper in front of him.

Alexandra had been indefatigable with Heather, cooking innumerable dishes until Heather swallowed something. This made him jealous. If mother had never been patient with him, he wanted Alexandra to tell him whether he was warm enough, what time he

should go to bed, what he should read in the train.

Perhaps this was why Heather had wanted to go to boarding school.

His resentment of her had gone deep. He had come to consider her warily. It was easier to keep away from someone; easier not to tangle with them. If she needed him, she could come to him.

A distance had been established. He understood that a life could pass like this.

Father, always an active, practical man, had taken the tranquillisers for a few days, sitting on the sofa near mother, waiting to feel better, looking as though he'd been hit on the head with a mallet. At last he threw the pills away, saying, "It's going to take more than a couple of pills to make me smile!"

Father resumed his pilgrimage around Harley Street. If you were sick, you went to a doctor. Where else could you go, in a secular age, to find a liberating knowledge?

It was then that Harry made the stupid remark.

They were leaving another solemn surgery, morbid with dark wood, creaky leather and gothic certificates. After many tellings, father had made a nice story of his despair and wrong meanings. Harry turned to the doctor and said, "There's no cure for living!"

"That's about right," replied the doctor, shaking his pen.

Then, with father looking, the doctor winked.

No cure for living!

As father wrote the cheque, Harry could see he was electric with fury.

"Shut your big mouth in future!" he said, in the street. "Who's asking for your stupid opinion! There's no cure! You're saying I'm incurable?"

"No, no-"

"What do you know! You don't know anything!"

"I'm only saying-"

Father was holding him by the lapels. "Why did we stay in that small house?"

"Why did you? What are you talking about?"

"The money went on sending you to a good school! I wanted you to be educated but you've turned into a sarcastic, smart-arsed idiot!"

The next time father visited the doctor, Harry's brother was debuted to accompany him.

Harry had a colleague who spent every lunch time in the pub, with whom Harry would discuss the 'problem' of how to get along with women. One day this man announced he had discovered the 'solution'.

Submission was the answer. What you had to do was go along with what the woman wanted. How, then, could there be conflict?

To Harry this sounded like a recipe for fury and murder but he didn't dismiss it.

Hadn't he, in a sense - not unlike all children - submitted to his mother's view of things? And hadn't this half killed his spirit and left him frustrated? He wasn't acting from his own spirit, but like a slave, and his inner spirit, alive still, hated it.

"Harry, Harry!" mother called. "I'm ready to go now."

He walked across the grass to her. She put her handkerchief in her bag.

"All right, mother!" He added, "Hardly worth going home now."

“Yes, dear. It is a lovely place. Perhaps you'd be good enough to put me here. Not that I'll care.”

“Right,” he said.

Father, the day he went to see the doctor, remembered how he had once loved. He wanted that loving back. Without it, living was a cold banishment.

Mother couldn't let herself remember what she loved. It was not only the unpleasant things that mother wanted to forget, but anything that might remind her she was alive. One good thing might be linked to others. There might be a flood of disturbing happiness.

Before father refused to have Harry accompany him on his doctor visits, Harry became aware, for the first time, that father thought for himself. He thought about men and women, about politics and the transport system in London, about horse racing and cricket, and about how someone should live.

Yet his father never read anything but newspapers. Harry recalled the ignorant, despised father in *Sons and Lovers*.

Harry had believed too much in people who were better educated. He had thought that the truth was in certain books, or in the thinkers who were current. It had never occurred to Harry that one could - should - work these things out for oneself. Who was he to do this?

Father had paid for his education yet it gave Harry no sustenance; there was nothing there he could use now, to help him grasp what was going on.

He was a journalist - he followed others, critically of course. But he served them; he put them first.

Television and newspapers bored Alexandra. “Noise” she called it. She had said: you'd rather read a newspaper than think your own thoughts.

He and mother made their way back to the car.

She had never touched, held or bent down to kiss him; her body was as inaccessible to him as it probably was to her. He had never slept in her bed. Now she took his arm. He thought she wanted him to support her, but she was steady. Affection, it might have been.

One afternoon, when Alexandra had returned from the hypnotherapist and was unpacking the shopping on the kitchen table, Harry asked her, “What did Amazing Olga say today?”

Alexandra said, “She told me something about what makes us do things, about what motivates us.”

“What did Mrs Amazing say? Self-interest?”

“Falling in love with things,” she said. “What impels us to act is love.”

“Shit,” said Harry.

The day she ran away, after the two of them had eaten and listened to music, Heather wanted to watch a film that someone at school had lent her. She sat on the floor in her pyjamas, sucking her thumb, wearing her Bugs Bunny slippers.

She wanted her father to sit with her, as she had as a kid, when she would grasp his chin, turning it in the direction she required. The film was 'The Piano', which, it seemed

to him, grew no clearer as it progressed. When they paused the film to fetch drinks and food, she said that understanding it didn't matter, adding, "particularly if you haven't been feeling well lately."

"Who's not feeling well?" he said. "Me, you mean?"

"Maybe," she said. "Anyone. But perhaps you."

She was worried about him; she had come to watch over him.

He knew she had got up later to watch the film another couple of times. He wondered whether she had stayed up all night.

In the morning, when he saw how nervous she looked, he said, "I don't mind if you don't want to go back to school."

"But you've always emphasised the 'importance of education'."

Here she imitated him, quite well. They did it, the three of them, showing him how foolish he was.

He went on, feebly he thought, but on, nevertheless: "There's so much miseducation."

"What?" She seemed shocked.

"Not the information, which is mostly harmless," he said. "But the ideas behind it, which come with so much force - the force that is called 'common sense'."

She was listening and she never listened.

She could make of it what she wanted. His uncertainty was important. Why pretend he had considered, final views on these matters? He knew politicians: what couldn't be revealed by them was ignorance, puzzlement, the process of intellectual vacillation. His doubt was a kind of gift, then.

He said, "About culture, about marriage, about education, death... You receive all sorts of assumptions that it takes years to correct. The less the better, I say. It's taken me years to correct some of the things I was made to believe early on."

He was impressed by how impressed she had been.

"I will go back to school," she said. "I think I should, for mum."

Before he took her to the station, she sat where her mother sat, at the table, writing in a notebook.

He had to admit that lately he had become frustrated and aggressive with Alexandra, angry that he couldn't control or understand her. By changing, she was letting him down; she was leaving him.

Alexandra rarely mentioned his mother and he never talked seriously about her for fear, perhaps, of his rage, or the memory of rage, it would evoke. But after a row over 'Olga' Alexandra said, "Remember this. Other people aren't your mother. You don't have to yell at them to ensure they paying attention. They're not half-dead and they're not deaf. You're wearing yourself out, Harry, trying to get us to do things we're doing already."

Alexandra had the attributes that mother never had. He hadn't, at least, made the mistake of choosing someone like his mother, of living with the same person forever without even knowing it.

Oddly, it was the ways in which she wasn't like mother which disturbed him the most.

He thought: a man was someone who should know, who was supposed to know.

Someone who knew what was going on, who had a vision of where they were all heading, separately and as a family. He couldn't fall, fail or see the surface of his brain as a lunar surface illuminated by random flares. Sanity was a great responsibility.

"Why did you run away from school?" he asked Heather at last.

Placing her hands over her ears, she said there were certain songs she couldn't get out of her head. Words and tunes circulated on an endless loop. This had driven her home to father.

He said, "Are the noises less painful here?"

"Yes."

He would have dismissed it as a minor madness, if he hadn't, only that afternoon-

He had been instructed to rest, and rest he would, after years of work. He had gone into the garden to lie on the grass beneath the trees.

There, at the end of the cool orchard, with a glass of wine beside him, his mind became possessed by brutal images of violent crime, of people fighting and devouring one another's bodies, of destruction and the police; of impaling, burning, cutting.

Childhood had sometimes been like this: hatred and the desire to bite, kill, kick.

He had been able to lie there for only twenty minutes. He walked, then, thrashing his head as if to drive the insanity away.

A better way of presenting the News might be this: a screaming woman dripping blood and guts, holding the corpse of a flayed animal. A ripped child; armfuls of eviscerated infants; pieces of chewed body.

This would be an image - if they kept it on screen for an hour or so - that would not only shock but compel consideration as to the nature of humankind.

He had run inside and turned the television on.

If he seemed to know as much about his own mind as he did about the governance of Zambia, how could his daughter's mind not be strange to her?

There was no day of judgement, when a person's life would be evaluated, the good and the bad, in separate piles. No day but everyday.

Alexandra was educating him: a pedagogy of adjustment and strength. These were the challenges of a man's life. It was pulling him all over the place. The alternative wasn't just to die feebly, but to self-destruct in fury because the questions being asked were too difficult.

If he and Alexandra stayed together, he would have to change. If he couldn't follow her, he would have to change more.

A better life was only possible if he forsook familiar experiences for seduction by the unfamiliar. Certainty would be a catastrophe.

The previous evening Alexandra had rung from her mobile phone. He thought the background noise was the phone's crackle, but it was the sea. She had left the taverna and was walking along the beach behind a group of other women.

"I've decided," she said straight away, sounding ecstatic.

"What is it, Alexandra?"

"It has become clear to me, Harry! My reason...let's say. I will work with the unconscious."

"In Thailand?"

"In Kent. At home."

"I guess you can find the unconscious everywhere."

"How we know others. What sense we can make of their minds. That is what interests me. When I'm fully trained, people will come -"

"Where? Where?" He couldn't hear her.

"To the house. We will need a room built, I think. Will that be all right?"

"Whatever you want."

"I will earn it back."

He asked, "What will the work involve?"

"Working with people, individually and in groups - in the afternoons and evenings - helping them understand their imaginations. It is a training, therefore, in possibility."

"Excellent."

"Do you mean that? This work is alien to you, I know. Today, today - a bunch of grown-ups - we were talking to imaginary apples!"

"Somehow it wouldn't be the same," he said, "with bananas! But I am with you - at your side, always...wherever you are!"

He had had intimations of this. There had been an argument.

He had asked her, "Why do you want to help other people?"

"I can't think of anything else as interesting."

"Day after day you will listen to people droning on?"

"After a bit, the self-knowledge will make them change."

"I've never seen such a change in anyone."

"Haven't you?"

"I don't believe I have," he said.

"Haven't you?"

He said agitatedly, "Why d'you keep repeating that like a parrot?" She was looked at him levelly. He went on, "Tell me when and where you've seen this!"

"You're very interested."

"It would be remarkable," he said. "That's why I'm interested."

"People are remarkable," she said. "They find all sorts of resources within themselves that were unused, that might be wasted."

"Is it from that 'Amazing' woman that you get such ideas?"

"She and I talk, of course. Are you saying I don't have a mind of my own?"

He said, "Are you talking about a dramatic change?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said. "I don't know. But I'm not ruling it out."

"That's something," she smiled. "It's a lot."

He had wanted to tell Heather that clarity was not illuminating; it kept the world away. A person needed confusion and muddle - good difficult knots and useful frustrations. Someone could roll up their sleeves and work, then.

He got mother into the car and started it.

She said, "Usually I lie down and shut the tops of me eyes at this time. You're not

going to keep me up are you?"

"Only if you want to eat. D'you want to do that?"

"That's an idea. I'm starving. Tummy's rumbling. Rumbly!"

"Come on."

In the car he murmured, "You were rotten to me."

"Oh was I so terrible?" she cried. "I only gave you life and fed and clothed you and brought you up all right, didn't I? You were never late for school!"

"Sorry? You couldn't wait for us to get out of the house!"

"Haven't you done better than the other boys? They're plumbers! People would give their legs to have your life!"

"It wasn't enough."

"It's never enough is it! It never was! It never is!"

He went on, "If I were you, looking back on your life now, I'd be ashamed."

"Oh would you," she said. "You've been so marvellous have you, you miserable little git!"

"Fuck you," he told his mother. "Fuck off."

"You're terrible," she said. "Picking an old woman to pieces the day she visits her husband's grave. I've always loved you," she said.

"It was no use to me. You never listened and you never talked to me."

"No, no," she said. "I spoke to you but I couldn't say it. I cared but I couldn't show it. I've forgotten why. Can't you forget all that?"

"No. It won't leave me alone."

"Just forget it," she said, her face creasing in anguish. "Forget everything!"

"Oh mother, that's no good. Nothing is forgotten, even you know that."

"Father took me to Venice and now I want to go again. Before it's too late - before they have to carry me wheelchair over the Wotsit of Cries."

"You'll go alone?"

"You won't take me-"

"I wouldn't walk across the road with you," he said. "If I could help it. I can't stand the sight of you."

She closed her eyes. "No, well... I'll go with the other old girls."

He said, "You want me to pay for you?"

"I thought you wouldn't mind." She said, "I might meet a nice chap! A young man! I could get off! I'm a game old bird in me old age!"

She started to cackle.

"Like what?" Heather asked. "What educational ideas are no good?"

"I think I have believed that if I waited, if I sat quietly at the table, without making a noise or movement - being good - the dish of life would be presented to me."

He should have added, People want to believe in unconditional love, that once someone has fallen in love with you, their devotion will continue, whether you spend the rest of your life lying on the sofa drinking beer or not. But why should they? If love was not something that could be worked up, it had to be kept alive.

Mother said, "Children are selfish creatures. Only interested in themselves. You get sick of them," she said. "You bloody hate them, screaming, whining, no gratitude. And

that's about it!"

"I know," he said. "That's true. But it's not the whole story!"

The restaurant was almost empty, with a wide window overlooking the street.

Mother drank wine and ate spare ribs with her fingers. The wine reddened her face; her lips, chin and hands became greasy.

"It's so lovely, the two of us," she said. "You were such an affectionate little boy, following me around everywhere. You became quite rough, playing football in the garden and smashing the plants and bushes."

"All children are affectionate." He said, "I'm fed up with it, mother."

"What are you fed up with now?" she said, as if his complaints would never cease.

"My job. I feel I'm in a cult, there."

"A cult? What are you talking about?"

"The bosses have made themselves into little gods. I am a little god, to some people. Can you believe it? I walk in - people tremble. I could ruin their lives in a moment-"

"A cult?" she said, wiping her mouth and dipping her fingers in a bowl of water.

"Those things they have in America?"

"It's like that but not exactly that. It is a cheerleader culture. There are cynics about, but they are all alcoholics. What the bosses want is to display ridiculous little statuettes on their shelves. They want to be written about by other journalists - the little praise of nobodies. Mother, I'm telling you, it's Nazi and it's a slave ideology."

He was shaking; he had become over-enthusiastic.

He said more mildly, "Still, work, it's the same for everyone. Even the Prime Minister must sometimes think, first thing in the morning-"

"Oh don't do it," she said. "Just don't."

"I knew you wouldn't understand. Alexandra and the kids wouldn't like it if I suddenly decided to leave for Thailand. I have four people to support."

"You don't support me," she said.

"Certainly not."

"That's your revenge is it?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me for saying so, dear, We're both getting on now. You could drop dead any minute. You've been sweating all day. Your face is damp. Is your heart all right?"

She touched his forehead with her napkin.

"My friend Gerald had a heart attack last month," he said.

"No. Your dad, bless him, retired and then he was gone. What would your wife and the kids do then?"

"Thank you, mother. What I'm afraid of, is that I will just walk out of my job or insult someone or go crazy like those gunmen who blaze away at strangers."

"You'd be on the news instead of behind it." She was enjoying herself. "You'd be better off on your own - like me. I've got no one bothering me. Peace! I can do what I want."

"I want to be bothered by others. It's called living." He went on, "Maybe I feel like this because I've been away for a week. I'll go in on Monday and find I don't have these worries."

"You will," she said. "Once a worry starts-"

"You'd know about that. But what can I do?"

"Talk to Alexandra about it. If she's getting all free and confident about herself, why can't you?"

"Yes, perhaps she can support me now."

They were about to order pudding when a motorcyclist buzzed down the street in front of them, turned left into a side street, hit a car, and flew into the air.

The waiters ran to the window. A crowd gathered; a doctor forced his way through. An ambulance arrived. The motorcyclist lay on the ground a long time. At last he was strapped onto a stretcher and carried to the ambulance which only travelled a few yards before turning off its blue light and klaxon.

"That's his life done," said mother. "Cheerio."

The ruined motorcycle was pushed onto the pavement. The debris was swept up. The traffic resumed.

Harry and mother put their knives and forks down.

"Even I can't eat any more," she said.

"Nor me."

He asked for the bill.

He parked outside the house and walked her to the door.

She made her milky tea. With a plate of chocolate biscuits beside her, she took her seat in front of the television.

The television was talking at her; he could feel she didn't want him there. She would sit there until bedtime.

He kissed her.

"Goodbye, dear." She dipped her biscuit in her tea. "Thank you for a lovely day."

"What are you going to do now? Nothing?"

"Have a little rest. It's not much of a life is it?"

"No."

He noticed a travel agent's brochure on the table.

He said, "I'll send you a cheque shall I, for the Venice trip."

"That would be lovely."

"When will you be going?"

"As soon as possible. There's nothing to keep me here."

"No."

While Heather was at home, Alexandra rang but Harry didn't say she was there. It was part of what a man sometimes did, he thought, to be a buffer between the children and their mother.

In the morning, before she left, Heather said she wanted him to listen to a poem she had written.

He listened, trying not to weep. He could hear the love in it.

Heather had come to cheer him up, to make him feel that his love worked, that it could make her feel better.

After Alexandra had rung from the beach, Harry rang Gerald and told him about the

'imaging', about the 'visualisation', the 'healing', the whole thing. Gerald, convalescing, took his call.

"I used to know a psychoanalyst," he said cheerfully. "I've always fancied talking about myself for a long time to someone. But it's not what the chaps do. It's good business, though, people buying into their own pasts - if Alexandra can think like that. Before, women wanted to be nurses. Now they want to be therapists."

"It's harmless, you're saying."

Gerald said, "And sometimes useful." He laughed, "Turning dreams into money for all of you, almost literally."

Gerald imagined it was almost the only way that Harry could grasp what Alexandra was doing.

But it wasn't true.

Harry drove around the old places after leaving mother. He wanted to buy a notebook and return to write down the thoughts his memories inspired. Maybe he would do it tonight, his last evening alone, using different coloured markers.

It started to rain. He thought of himself on the street in the rain as a teenager, hanging around outside chip shops and pubs - not bored, that would underestimate what he felt - but unable to spit out or swallow the amount of experience coming at him.

It had been a good day.

Walking along a row of shops he remembered from forty years ago, he recalled a remark of some philosopher that he had never let go. The gist of it was: happiness is wanting one thing. The thing was love, if that was not too pallid a word. Passion, or wanting someone, might be better. In the end, all that would remain of one's years would be the quality of one's link with others, of how far one had gone with them.

Harry turned the car and headed away from his childhood.

He had to go to the supermarket. He would buy flowers, cakes, champagne and whatever attracted his attention. He would attempt to tidy the house; he would work in the garden, clearing the leaves. He would do the thing he dreaded: sit down alone and think.

The next morning he would pick Alexandra up from the airport and if the weather was good they would eat and talk in the garden. She would be healthy, tanned and full of ideas.

He had to phone Heather to check whether she was all right. It occurred to him to write to her. If he knew little of her day-to-day life, she knew practically nothing of him, his past and what he did most of the time. Parents wanted to know everything of their children, but withheld themselves.

He thought of father under the earth and of mother watching television; he thought of Alexandra and his children. He was happy.